
katya berger andreadakis

and
john berger

titian
nymph and shepherd

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

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Preface

I

The first regular money I earned – I was a painter at the time – was working for the Worker Education Association in London. Three evenings a week I would take the tube to Edgware and talk with London Transport bus drivers and conductors about art. I was younger than any of them and had (for the epoch) outrageously long hair.

Some of the bus people painted as a hobby and would show me their work; others, for different reasons, were curious about how paintings are made and why. I think they put up with me because I seemed to them improbable. At the same time, they didn't disbelieve me. And so they accepted me as a kind of expert of the unexpected.

'You gave us a surprise last week,' they'd say. 'What have you got up your sleeve tonight?' I brought books with me and, drinking cups of tea and eating the cakes which one of the conductresses had baked, we turned the pages ...

I received more from them than they did from me. I began to learn something about the space in their lives – and for each one it was slightly different – which they hoped their experience of art might fill. I began to see dimly how life can welcome art.

Years passed, and I became a writer. Some of the books I wrote were about painting and artists. My work owed a lot to certain philosophers and art historians – to Wölfflin, Antal, Max Raphael, Klingender, Ortega y Gasset, Hauser, Berenson, Friedländer, Walter Benjamin, and others. Yet I'm not an art historian. I am too impatient, and I live too much in the present.

When I want to get closer to works from the past, I do drawings from them. (As I have done drawings from Titian's paintings.) This is, however, a gestural approach, not an historical one. In drawing, you try to touch, if only for an instant – like playing tag – the master's vision.

What still intrigues me most is the question I first faced during those evenings in Edgware. How do you get a work of art, once created, re-enter life? Promising what?

About this there are still stories to be told and, as with any story, they have to be followed rather than invented.

Katya, my daughter, grew up surrounded by a lot of art books. Later she travelled and would visit museums and send me postcards. We didn't talk much about painting – far more about places, film, animals, language. When she sent me the first card from Venice, I replied hoping that she would reply. She did, and this story began.

John Berg

PS Katya's letters were written in French, which is her first language; mine were in English. Much later, Katya translated my letters into French, and I did the same with hers into English. We have used my English translations for this book.

II

As long as I can remember, I have been used to looking at paintings. Without any fuss, a monograph on Caravaggio or the catalogue of a Poussin exhibition was dumped on my knees, and I was left alone to turn the pages. By a flaring paraffin lamp – this was in a decrepit, out-of-the-way farmhouse in Provence where I spent the most luminous moments of my childhood – I started, as I looked at the books, to dream – a bit like one of those figures in a Chagall painting crossing the sky above the roofs of churches.

Stories were prompted by the contours of an angel playing a musical instrument. Others came panting from the clenched bodies of *The Rape of the Sabines*. Soon yet others were being whispered from between fruits in a still-life, from the borders of a colour, from the scratches of a texture.

Several years later – this was when I was earning my first wages working evenings at a McDonald's – I realised how there's no communication more total than that between an object (preferably a work of art) and the one watching it. That painting over there, that story, that melody, but also that hairstyle or that expression – each took me by the hand and led me into its forest. Many things stayed hidden, others spoke to all my senses. It was as if my own gaze took on flesh from contact with the thing seen and then blew on it with warm breath which was almost visible, as when one breathes into frozen air.

At about the same time, I came to understand that I was never more alive than when I was able to give myself, even if only partially, to such an exchange. The capacity to join myself to what I was looking at – and particularly if it was something which had been created – offered me nothing less than immortality – for I left in this thing, destined to outlive me, some scrap of what I had lived.

A river painted by Courbet, containing something of my own experience of water flowing, of wetness of the visible, was more intensely and permanently alive than I could ever be. And, what is more, conferred upon me a little of its own immortality. It went beyond me and tugged me into the universal. A prelude by Bach, taking the same path as one of my dreams, but surpassing it in solidity and precision, would then miraculously lend my dream, retrospectively, its own grace.

At this age, too, I came upon my dearest wish: The best thing that might happen, I decided, would be to become entirely a painting, a novel, a quartet. Not as a protagonist, whose own life was built in art, but in a more diffused way, to become the under-canvas for a portrait of a gentleman, to become the recurring rhyme of a poem, or to become a description of people dancing at a ball. Thus I would breathe onto such creations and be materialised in them for ever.

At first, I invented a god who lived in the sky, surrounded by a committee of those who were timeless and who looked through a telescope to direct the story of my life! Later, my narcissism paled away to

the years, I found enough comfort in the idea that with or without a telescope focused on me, a simple movement of a human face (mine or somebody else's) could be the equivalent of a work of art, and that it was the quality of seeing – and, equally, the power of the invitation to look – which offered the feeling of cosmic harmony which I had discovered when a painting welcomed me into its forest.

I started to hunt everywhere for promises of this magic, a magic which is both permanent and ephemeral, inimitable and universal. And so it was that I was led, with the passage of time, to become a film critic, still searching for this sudden solidity and swift incarnation which we call *meaning*.

The Rape of the Sabines, which I had goggled at long ago by the flaring paraffin lamp and which, for a fraction of a second, surrounded the whole world with its frame, had little by little shown me how art, with its miraculous eye – an eye which both fixes and liberates – can seize the essential.

When in 1990 I went to the Titian exhibition in Venice, I saw the old painter coming towards me, and I saw myself spread out in paint on a scrap of canvas. This is what made me want to start a dialogue with John: he who had hinted to me how life welcomes art, he who knew, as well as I do, that everything still escapes us.

Katya Berger Andreadaki

'That's purity,' he said,

'It is the same on the slopes as in your entrails.'

And he spread his hands as would
an old experienced God creating clay
and heavenliness together.

Odysseus Elyt

PIAZZA SAN MARCO, VENICE

John,

What do I think about Titian? In one word on a postcard: flesh.

Love, Katy

AMSTERDAM

Kut,

All right, flesh. First, I see his own, when he's old. Why do I immediately think of Titian as an old man? Out of solidarity – given my own age? No, I don't think so. It's to do with our century and the bitterness of its experience. It's always searching for rage and wisdom rather than harmony. Late Rembrandts, late Goyas, Beethoven's last sonatas and quartets, late Titians ... Imagine the élan of our century whose old master was the young Raphael!

I think of the self-portraits painted when he was in his sixties or seventies. Or himself as the penitent Saint Jerome, painted when he was in his eighties. (Perhaps it's not a self-portrait; it's only my guess but I feel he was thinking intensely about himself when he was painting it.)

What do I find? A man who is physically imposing and has considerable authority. You can't take liberties with him. With the late, decrepit Rembrandt it would have been easy. This one knows how power works, and he has exercised his own. He has turned the trade of being a painter into a profession – like that of a General or an Ambassador or a Banker. He's the first to do this. And he has the confidence that goes with it.

And also a painterly confidence. In his late works, he is the first European painter to display – rather than hide or disguise – his manual gestures when putting the pigment onto the canvas. Thus he makes painting physically confident in a new way – the act of the painting hand and arm becomes expressive in itself. Other artists like Rembrandt or van Gogh or Willem de Kooning will follow his example. At the same time, his originality and boldness were never foolhardy. His attitude to everything in Venice was realistic.

And yet, yet... the more I look at the way he painted himself, the more I see a frightened man. I don't mean a coward. He doesn't take risks, but he has courage. He does not normally show his fear. But his brush can't help but touch it. It's most evident in his hands. They're nervous like the hands of a money lender. Yet his fears could not, I think, have been concerned with money.

A fear of death? The Plague was rampant in Venice. A fear leading to penitence? A fear of judgement? It may have been any of these, but they are too general to help us understand him or to get closer to him. He lives to be a very old man. The fear lasts a long time. And long-drawn-out fear becomes doubt.

What provoked this doubt in him? I suspect it was intimately connected with Venice, with the city's special kind of wealth and commerce and power. All of which, as you say, had to do with the flesh.

Love, John

GIUDECCA, VENICE

John,

Several times whilst I was wandering through the exhibition, I crossed paths with, was followed by, lost sight of, and then again found myself beside, an old man. He was alone and muttering to himself.

The first time I saw him, he was coming back from one of the last rooms and very decidedly making for the painting *Christ Carrying the Cross*. And there at my side he stopped.

'One uses painting', he suddenly said, 'to clothe oneself, to keep warm ...'

At first, I felt put out and scowled at him, but he went on, as if nothing had happened.

'Jesus carries his cross and, me, I carry the art of painting, I wear it like something woollen.'

He had won me over.

Now he was making for the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. In some way, I must have annoyed him, for he appeared to be angry, spitting out disconnected words.

'The fur, ough! The fur of my painting... stuff, stuff ...'

By *The Portrait of a Man*, he spoke directly to the sitter, poking his nose towards the painted nose.

'First I painted you all dressed up, then I did a whole painting of an animal's skin!'

He didn't need to turn round to know that I was following him, and as we passed a group of visitors who were listening to their guide, he said to me out of the corner of his mouth, as if it were a joke: 'Dogs, rabbits, sheep, they all have their fur to keep them warm and, me, I want to imitate them with my brushes!'

When he next spoke, not without a little pride, I wasn't sure whether he was referring to the portrait of a Cardinal or to the *Portrait of a Man*.

‘Nobody else has painted men’s beards like that!’ he said. ‘They’re soft as monkey’s hair.’

I lost sight of him. A little later, the gallery’s alarm siren started up. Given that my friend (we had both now smiled at each other) obviously knew little about the rules and routines of modern art exhibition, I immediately thought of him. No sooner had I done so, than I saw a uniformed official remonstrating with the old man and indicating the statutory distance which must be respected before each canvas. The old man was saying ‘You must surely see, velvet, you must see, velvet is my favourite material and I can’t resist its touch!’

From that moment on, he decided to stay with me. He followed wherever I went. He continued his monologue, however, and didn’t attempt conversation.

Whilst I was looking at *Danaë*, he abruptly dragged me towards the Berlin *Self-Portrait*.

‘It’s a pity they didn’t hang them in the same room,’ he said. ‘The hair on the body, the hair of the head, feathers, nobody can get more naked than that... I wash and wash my colours until they look like the coat of an animal. By working on clothes you can make them look worn, silky, clinging, almost like flesh.’

After this, for him, long speech, he seemed a little discouraged. For half an hour he didn’t say a word. In front of *Venus and Adonis*, he simply verified that I was studying the picture correctly. For my part, I showed my admiration by opening my eyes and mouth wide.

He seemed almost to have finished.

Before the *Flaying of Marsyas*, there was another splutter of words: ‘When you skin an animal, you touch the truth about flesh.’

In front of the *Pietà*, he sat down. I think he sat there for a very long time. At first, I didn’t know whether to wait, to greet him, or, to tell him my own impressions. He made a sign for me to come closer. Certainly, he knew that his remarks about fur had impressed me, for instead of talking about the famous mysterious hand imploring the saint’s statue in the *Pietà* – the hand I was staring fixedly – he went his own way and repeated ‘Hair is to the body what painting is to the world!’

Then, with a deep laugh, he added something which made me think of you: ‘You can burrow into it, you can look underneath it, you can lift it, or you can pull it – but don’t try to shave it – it’ll always grow again!’

Before turning away from him for good, I had a very clear image of my own body lying naked on a canvas in the exhibition: of moss underneath me, of a dog at my side, of my outlines scarcely separable from the surrounding landscape. A landscape which, later, Courbet might have walked over. With the grass, the clouds, and the soil, my flesh would then have been the earth’s coat.

Hugs, Katy

HAUTE SAVOIE

Kut,

All that you say about fur makes me think of his dogs. Was the old man by any chance accompanied by a dog?

I think he loved dogs. Perhaps they calmed or encouraged him. Were they witnesses? Witnesses he could trust. Dumb, dumb witnesses. Perhaps it sometimes happened that, whilst painting with his right hand, his left ferociously stroked one of his dogs. The fur as company for his fingers, and the dog shifting its weight as his arm moved!

At that time, it was something of a fashion to put dogs into paintings. One finds them in Rubens, Velasquez, Veronese, Cranach, van Dyck ... amongst other things, they were a kind of go-between between men and women. Ambassadors of desire. They represented (according to their breed and size) both femininity and virility. They were almost human – or they shared the privacy of humans – and yet they were guileless. They were also randy. Randy, and nobody could raise their eyebrows because, after all, they were dogs!

We see them in many of his paintings. In portraits of men and women and in mythological subjects. But nowhere more strangely than in the late picture *A Boy with Dogs*. There's no other painting like it, and I tend to agree with the experts who mostly dismiss the idea that this is a detail taken from a larger canvas. What we see is more or less what the old man meant us to see. A boy – how old do you think he is? Three? Four at the most? – alone in a dark landscape with two dogs and two young pups (perhaps four weeks old?). The boy puts his arm round the white dog – who, I guess, is male – for reassurance. The mother, the bitch, is the only one looking at us, and the pups have nosed their way through the fur to her teats.

Despite the dusk, the scene is calm, peaceful, *comblé* as the French would say. Nobody wants anything more.

The dogs are the boy's family. I would even say parents. The boy's legs and the two visible legs of the white dog are like four legs of the same table – practically interchangeable. Everyone is waiting for death, which is to say living.

Isn't waiting the essential occupation of dogs? Learnt maybe because of their proximity to humans. Waiting for the next event or the next arrival. Here the last important event, it seems, was birth. Pup and boy born into this bitch of a life. Born to wait for death. Yet meanwhile there's warmth, milk, the mysteries of the fur, and eyes which are speechless.

The old man, of course, wanted your sympathy. No, not sympathy, your interest. Because if you were interested, you would pose for him, and he wanted to paint you! Painting women, he forgot his doubt. But each time he forgot, he was adding to his worry. All the women he painted – from Adriane to the Repentant Magdalene – represented this worry, which wasn't about women. Each one consoled and at the same time reinforced his worry.

The painting with the dogs is about the consolation. It's a honeyed painting. It's about bliss. The pups have discovered bliss in the fur – as Jove will never find it with Danaë or Danaë with Jove.

Meanwhile the other three (the boy and the two adult dogs) are waiting ... And the two waiting dogs watching, are the old man's accomplices. They are the nearest he can find to what he has dreamt of painting and to what he paints with. They can bite and they are innocent.

I love you, John

ATHEN

John,

I try to find an answer to the question 'What made him paint?' And I can hear only one word, coming from all the chaos of physical matter, as if from the bottom of a black well.

Desire. His desire (as befits an eminently virile painter) was, if not to cut into appearances, at least to penetrate and lose himself in the skin of things. Yet, being human and being a painter, he came up against the impossibility of doing this: the heart of nature, the animal in humans, the world's pelt can never be seized, and, above all, they are unrepeatable, unreproducible. And so, for a while, like many of his contemporaries, he used his skill to show that everything was vanity, *vanitas vanitatis*: beauty, wealth, art.

The women in his pictures – or rather *the* Titian woman, with her special simplicity and innocence – to him a relentless reminder of his artistic impotence and defeat. Him the master! Perhaps it was the women who embodied the doubt you talk about? Naked, the colours of their flesh are for drowning in. Never have the painted bodies of women demanded as much as his do, to be touched, to be pressed with the hands – as Mary Magdalene presses her hand through her hair against her own breast. Yet like all other bodies in paintings across the whole world, those painted by Titian can be neither touched nor plunged into.

Gradually, he came to understand that in the very impotence of his art (this art which continually underlined the virility of the men it depicted), there might be a hidden miracle. With the sables and bristles of his brushes – instead of rendering the texture of the world's hide – he could twist its limbs. Unable to reproduce, he could transform and transfigure. Instead of being the servant of appearances obliged to lick their boots, he could impose his will upon them. Produce arms or hands which could never exist. Bend limbs against their nature. Fuzz objects to the point of their becoming unrecognisable. Make contours tremble so that they came to depict matter without any outline. Derive the difference between bodies and corpses. (I'm thinking of the last *Pietà*.)

I pack all kinds of questions concerning power, prestige, even the question of the dog, into this train of thought. The truth is that Titian's art is itself untouchable, inviolable. It calls out and then it forbids. We remain open-mouthed.

Kisses, Katy

PAR

Kut,

Vanitas vanitatis. In 1575, the Plague ravaged Venice, killing almost a third of the city's inhabitants. The old man, aged nearly a hundred, died from the Plague in 1576. As did his son. After their deaths their house on the Biri Grande, full of pictures and precious objects, was looted. And the following year, a fire in the Ducal Palace destroyed paintings by Bellini, Veronese, Tintoretto, and the old man.

I see you today, not in the Piazza San Marco, but on the terrace of your flat in Athens. In Gyzi, where all the kitchens and bedrooms overlook one another, and the washing hangs between telephone cables and hibiscus flowers. Perhaps Athens is the antipodes of Venice? Dry, makeshift, ungovernable. A city of merchants, national heroes, and the widows of heroes, where nobody dresses up.

And I'm writing in a Paris suburb, and I've been to the Sunday market. I saw young couples there, pale, poorly dressed against the rain, wearing jeans, hair lacquered, with city acne, holding hands, pushing prams, teasing in argot, each one with a thin, crooked-toothed recipe for happiness. And as I watched them I asked myself: What would they say about the *Flaying of Marsyas*? Who knows. Everyone lives legends.

In the *Flaying of Marsyas*, a lapdog is licking drops of blood off the ground below where Marsyas is strung up. On the right, there's another dog, held by a boy, who is very like the one in the painting with the pups.

OK. Marsyas, the satyr-artist, entered a musical contest with the god Apollo and lost. Under the agreed conditions, the winner could do what he liked with the loser, and Apollo chose to flay the satyr alive! There are some convincing allegorical interpretations. But what interests me is why the old man chose this subject. It's very close to what he told you in the gallery. Satyrs were, by definition, creatures who revealed how skin was like fur, and both were the outer coverings of a mystery. A kind of clothing which one couldn't unbutton or unzip except with a killing knife.

The two men in the Marsyas canvas, with their blades and their precision (I have seen peasants skin goats with exactly the same gestures), are the precursors of Fontana and Saura, who, in our century, slashed the canvases they painted in pursuit of what lay beyond the skin of the canvas, deep in the wound.

But even after one has accepted the subject and interpreted it, one finds oneself face to face with something more startling! The scene (which in life would be an abominable scene of torture) is bathed in a light of honey and an atmosphere of elegiac fulfilment.

You find exactly the same atmosphere in the *Nymph and Shepherd*, painted at the same time. Yet the *Nymph and Shepherd* is a love scene, and in it the shepherd is playing the pipes which cost Marsyas his life!

Find the old man in Athens and ask him what he meant.

It must be the season of pomegranates.

John,

You're right, it's the season for pomegranates. I'm looking at one now. Split open by the centrifugal energy of its own ripeness. He would have been able to paint its vivid blood and its granular flesh except that it's too exotic, too eastern for him. Rather, I see for him the stone of a peach. Enlarged enormously and flattened. In fact, I see such a stone as the ground of his painting, as a kind of lining to the canvas!

Yesterday I was looking for the old man to ask him your question about why the light is so honeyed in the painting of Marsyas' torture. Instead I found a gathering of other old men in Akadimias Street right in the centre of Athens.

Thousands of vehicles pass there every hour of the day and night. It's also the turn-around point of the city's principal bus lines. It's always crowded. It's where I pick up my bus to go to work every day. Bus no. 222. And there, two days ago, some people, waiting to get on their bus, met their deaths.

The bus – which should have taken them home for their lunch break – went out of control and ploughed into the crowd, laying low eight people before ramming into a barrier and stopping. The victims, who were mostly students, were suffocated, the bus on top of them. Screams, blood, chaos. The police and ambulance couldn't get through, for there were too many people. One hour later, the radio announced the victims' names. Everybody cried and crossed themselves. A tragedy. Yet it's the aftermath I want to tell you about, for it takes us to the heart of Greece.

When I got off my bus there yesterday (it was a bus no. 222 which caused the deaths), I saw a gathering of three or four hundred people, all men, mostly old-age pensioners – those same men go every morning to the smoky *kafenios*, the cafés for male clients only, to play backgammon, sip the ouzos, and comment on what's happening in the world – rather than trying to change it. In Akadimias Street, they were waving their arms about and shouting with great excitement.

At first, I thought it must be a new meeting place for a political debate preceding the elections. But no. What these old men had come to do was to reconstitute the event. Each one had decided when he had awakened yesterday morning to make his way to the scene of the drama and try to see more clearly what had happened.

'The girl student was there. She wanted to run when she saw the bus coming towards her, but the crowd was too dense – and there was also the bus shelter, which stopped her going in the other direction.'

'No, you've understood nothing! It was the ill-fated old pensioner who must have been standing here because they said his legs were the first to be broken! Old bones break easily'

'I tell you, those who died were all further down there. The ones here escaped. Those over the barrier, they got it. The others were only wounded, and now they're in Evangelismos Hospital. They'll survive – thank God. Think though of the families of those who, for no reason, died yesterday at 12.15, think of them!'

And so on. A chorus straight out of Aeschylus. Or perhaps, more exactly, the agora, the future Roman forum. The market-place where everybody met to discuss the affairs of the *polis*.

When tourists enthuse about the living heritage of ancient Greece, it makes me a little sick. It's too easy, too obvious. And it reminds one painfully of the political nullity into which Greek civilisation has fallen. But one thing has survived unquestionably, and that's the national proclivity for *commentary*. To relive happenings, to make a synthesis of them, and to draw conclusions and lessons (which are usually forgotten the next day). Greek philosophy, in its ancient sense and in its contemporary popular sense, comes exactly from this vision of the Chorus: to tell, to take account of the consequences, to measure the importance.

Today I passed by Akadimias Street again, I can't avoid it. A smaller crowd of men was still there doing the same thing. Meanwhile women had clearly come yesterday afternoon, when the men were taking their siesta, for flowers had been placed all along the fatal barrier.

I think I'll never see him again in the form of an old man. In Venice, he was simply wearing one of his disguises. Just as Zeus transformed himself into a rain of gold to take Danaë, the old man continually transforms himself, according to the circumstances, the place, the desire.

If he shows himself to me here, it is in the rough walls darkened by the filthy air of Athens; or in the soil – a dry earth slightly dampened by the rain – or in a cloud in the sky, cottony, curdled, grey; or in the noise of a motorbike, farting, coughing, spitting.

Each time, I know it's him, for he tells me the same thing in the same voice. 'Scratch, scratch,' he says. 'Scratch everything you can scratch!' And the word boils in the depths of his throat.

I heard this voice nearly every day during the six months I was confined to bed in Gyzi. On the wall beside the bed, there was a large poster of his painting of Danaë. During the interminable hours lying there, I could either look through my window, which gave on to a second window, beyond which another life was being lived, or I could look at the telly (beyond which there was the pretence of other lives being lived), or I could look at his painting: a woman, nude, always the same, lying on a shelf with cushions around her.

A woman painted as from the inside and only clothed in her skin afterwards. The opposite of what Goya did when he undressed the Maja. The old man first put himself inside – or behind – the canvas and from there he burrowed his way towards the visible surface of the body. In the case of both painters, it is the breasts which are revealing. In the Titian, you have to imagine being inside the body to feel the fullness of her right breast: its imperceptible shadow is evoked so minimally that you feel nothing, if you don't feel it from the inside. Yet this makes it all the more real, all the more quivering, all the more desirable.

Whereas in the Goya, the protuberance, the swelling, is too clear, too held up by a corsage which has disappeared, too visible, and therefore, oddly, not carnal. No?

The old man was avid. For cash, for women, for power, for more years to live. He was jealous of God. Angry. So he started to imitate him. He didn't only reproduce, like so many other painters, the appearance of things created by God, but he started to give these things, as God had done, a skin, a hide of fur, hair, fat, an epidermis, folds, wrinkles. (Or he did the opposite, he took off the covering of flesh, as in the *Flaying of Marsyas*; he cut it open to demonstrate the skill of his own flesh-art.)

No other artist gets so close to making us believe in the palpitating life of what he paints. And he gets there not only by copying nature, but equally by knowing how to turn the spectator's brain. He knows where we place the life, the warmth, the tenderness in his painted bodies.

Titian worked like Shakespeare. You have the impression, before their works, that an arm or a woman can say everything, because, like magicians, they knew exactly where the human spirit loves to drop itself. In a way, they are greater than God, for they know everything about their fellow men and women! Hence their vengeance.

I imagine a picture he might have painted, as you once imagined a non-existent Frans Hals. It would show Eve being created from Adam's rib. Flesh coming out of flesh. God placing his hands on matter and bringing another life to life. The setting would be a forest where there are tree-trunks and a lot of moss. Two inert, naked forms in the mud, whose substance seems to be alive. Finally, the act of painting, continually repeated like fornication, becomes a body. Not a body like Pygmalion's, whose body is washed marble. Here the body can sometimes be obscene.

Eve born of Adam as the universe was born of God, as painting is born of Titian, as life can be born of art, as I was born of you, as Chloé was born of me.

So I have to tell you I see him everywhere, the old man, I see him even in your granddaughter, who is more beautiful than light, sweeter than fire, gentler than water. Already she has won over our death.

Love, Katy

HAUTE SAVOIR

Darling Kut,

I've been reading Erwin Panofsky's book on the old man. Apart from Panofsky's erudition, he had a love for what men left behind as signs of their thoughts and feelings – like that of an astronomer for the stars. So reading him, you enter a kind of stellar peace.

And two notions struck me. One about perception in general and the other about the old man and his tricks.

Perception never only takes in a single fact or a single series of facts. It's always receiving messages.

from a circuit or a whole field of energy. It picks up waves rather than particles. This is particularly pronounced when it concerns the perception of a work of art – which is already such a nexus of energy. But it's true of all perception. Look at an animal listening or smelling. Its attention never has a *single* focus but *scans* a whole area. Why do I say this? Perhaps it explains the 'coincidence' of even the simplest perceptions.

For instance, I said the old man's hands made me think of a money-lender. I learn from Panofsky that Jacopo Bassano painted a portrait of Titian as the money-lender in his *Purification of the Temple!*

For instance, you write: 'I imagine a picture he might have painted. It would show Eve being created from Adam's rib. Flesh coming out of flesh. God placing his hands on matter and bringing another life to life.' And Panofsky quotes Baschini, who wrote about the old man in Venice in 1600, saying that when painting he used his figures 'like God when he created man'.

For instance – in relation to what the old man told you about fur – it seems that Titian's personal seal (trademark) showed a she-bear licking her cub into shape! And his motto was *Natura potentior ars* (art is more powerful than nature).

I was in Vienna recently – a city I don't like, but in which nevertheless I feel at home. The capital of reincarnations! Whilst there I went again – of course! – to look at his *Nymph and Shepherd*. And for the hundredth time, I watched the hand caressing the nymph's right arm. Caressing is not the right word. Scratching is better, like he told you. Lightly, lightly scratching. And for the hundredth time, I said to myself: It *isn't* her own hand. Its anatomical position, its gesture and the fact that it appears to have a cuff, make it impossible. It's a roving hand which belongs to nobody.

Perhaps it was going to be her hand, and the old man painted it differently, making it less and less her hand. If so, he did it for a reason – it was not clumsiness or shortsightedness. The touching of the hand is the centre of the whole painting. It is what the painting *came* to be about.

An act which is a gesture of calling, of farewell, of greeting? Perhaps all three. In any case, it's an act that came from the old man, not from the nymph.

In *Walk Me Home*, the unfinished film which Nella and Tim Neat and I made, William, at the end, gets out of bed, dresses, adjusts his tie in the hotel mirror, and, before leaving for good, goes and stands by the bed where Cloud is still sleeping. He is old, and Cloud is a much younger woman. He knows he has to go. In five minutes (this he doesn't know), he'll be dead. He puts out his hand to touch Cloud for the last time. As you know, I played the role of William, and at this moment the gesture I made (I realise now, but I wasn't thinking of it then) was *exactly* the gesture of the hand in the Vienna painting.

I see you in your snake-dress.

With all my love for Chloé and Oresters and Snake, John

ATHENS

John,

So, you've got it into your head to see me as (to turn me into?) a serpent. As you wish it, I'm willing to be a serpent or something else. I'll play, imitate, and make believe. Like in the field – remember – when I was a kid, and we stopped to picnic on our Sunday walks in the Jura. And I would mimic for you whoever or whatever I thought might amuse you.

But it is best with animals. We can identify with them so deeply. They are just close enough and just far enough away for it to be easy. They are the *other*, a little more the *other* than another person. And so they're easier to understand; they demand imagination, aim, identification, whereas people demand intelligence, mental calculation, abstractions. And the meaner the human world becomes – the more people slip into egoism and the greed of despair – the more the animals align themselves with us, becoming brothers, closer than our human brothers. In fact, when this happens, even nature, even the inorganic, offers a shelter to our imaginations. Nature comes closer, just as those who are called the closest become more distant.

Maybe this is somewhat comparable to why you felt at home in Vienna, the capital of reincarnation as you call it. No towns are more densely populated with the relics of other lives than the cities of art – Venice, Florence – even New York. So in a way, Vienna has an 'animal-effect'. The city encourages inward journeys, projections, flights of imagination.

Serpents! There's a man painted by Titian who to me is an animal: something between a snake and a lamb. He's in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, and some people attribute his portrait to Giorgione (You?) The sweetness of the picture is indeed Giorgionesque, but its animal side and its cunning make me think of Titian.

Look at his hand – it's made of the same stuff as the hide on his back. Look at the curls near his ear and you think of cattle.

His face, of course, belongs to the family of men painted by Titian. You remember I had the same feelings of a blood likeness shared by the women Titian painted. (Magdalenas, Venuses, Nymphs, Girls ...) For some reason he was haunted by an archetypal man and woman, an original Adam and Eve from his own Creation!

The man in Munich holds the same glove in his hand as the *Man with a Glove* in the Louvre. But tell me, what is that snake-hat in the background? Isn't it a Serpent?

In the *Nymph and Shepherd*, the nymph is lying on a fur – just as I dreamed of doing, just as I still dream of doing! Not only on a fur: on a whole animal specially stripped for me, Katya, on a just skinned Marsyas.

Inside herself, she then becomes an animal, rejoins nature and is welcome there. Maybe William's hand belongs to the animal, to nature, to Creation?

Anyway, I envy her, how I envy her! Lying half turned away, facing the other world – the world of the peach stone. There for ever on a canvas, at peace, still, placid in the music of nothing. Already

immortal without even having had to live! Existing to be seen, yes, but only as her Creator decides exhibited and protected at the same time! Focus of the craziest phantasms and interpretations, lending herself to other minds yet, at the same time, unalterable, immutable.

Supposing when we are dead we are able to reincarnate in paintings or music, and not only in other human beings. Wouldn't it be better? Come to think of it, you don't have to die to do this. It's enough to make the effort now of joining the universe of objects! And what could be more peaceful?

It seems that on Mount Athos, where no woman is allowed to set foot, there's an inscription on one of the monasteries:

ΑΝ ΠΕΘΑΝΕΙΣ ΠΡΙΝ ΠΕΘΑΝΕΙΣ, ΔΕΝ ΘΑ
ΠΕΘΑΝΕΙΣ ΟΤΑΝ ΠΕΘΑΝΕΙΣ.

'If you die before dying, you do not die at the moment of death.'

Take care. All my love, K

PAR

Kut,

With the rendezvous which you suggest – half turned away, resting on your arm, facing another world (the world of the peach stones), lying on Marsyas, peaceful, still, without a sound in the music, nothing, a rendezvous on the far side of waking up, with this rendezvous you'd seduce any man! And maybe that's why it's so much a painting about seduction. Not the shepherd seducing the nymph, or the nymph the shepherd. It's the two of them with the old man seducing anyone who passes. Seducing with the promise of seduction.

Today I'm sending you two postcards which are also about seduction. The portrait of the young Isabella d'Este. The old man painted her from imagination and from other portraits of her, when she was in fact sixty! And the *Girl in a Fur*, a portrait of a 'Venetian Courtesan'. The model was one of Titian's favourites at the time. When he painted it, he was forty-seven years old.

All my love, John

ATHEN

John,

The painting of Isabella d'Este is to me more like a floral arrangement, a composition of textures than a portrait of a real noblewoman, closer to Arcimboldo than to Velasquez. Is this the result of painting a portrait from imagination instead of from a model?

What makes it strange, however, is that its thrust is neither metaphysical (as with Arcimboldo) nor decorative. ~~Once again, he wants us to touch the stuff, to put our hand inside~~ – like Saint Thomas in the wound of Christ. He wants to make us feel it as palpable. And this is why dressed figures are sometimes nearer to nakedness than certain undressed ones. The more palpable, the more naked.

The epitome of such ‘palpability’ is reached when he combines naked flesh with thick fur, as on the second postcard. Here we’re at the height of pictorial eroticism. We drown in it.

The paleness of flesh against the darkness of fur, hair married to the pearls within it, the breast with its scarcely visible transparency and its discretion, which is nothing else but invitation, the eyes darker than jewels, and, finally, the slash in the sleeve, whose opening, pointed at by her fingers, is luminous and curly, artless and affected. Everything here implies pleasure – including the ring on the finger and the metal bracelet round the plump wrist.

Jewels remind us, don’t they, of the pleasure we’ll lose when we’re dead, and how they and the precious stones will still be here? They console a body for its vulnerability. Come on, say the jewels wear us and we’ll lend you some of our immutability.

(The way she holds her waist is consoling, too – as if she were very gently rocking herself. I do exactly this after suffering some humiliation or slight abuse.)

Jewels function a little like the old man’s art. They make flesh more flesh, they defy the ravages of perfection of nature, they mock mortality and they almost – but not quite alas! – reach eternity, from which everything comes and to which everything returns. Both his art and jewels are a human response to the arrogance of God, to God’s monopoly in Creation, to his implacable running of our destinies.

Love, J

TRAIN: GENEVA – PARIS

Kut,

Might it be that all flesh is feminine – even the flesh of men? Maybe what is specifically male are men’s fantasies, ambitions, ideas, obsessions. Could their flesh be female?

Love, Joh

ATHENS

John,

Titian, painter of flesh and guts, their rumblings and liquids. Painter of hair and the tamed beast

man. Painter of the skin as an entry or exit – like the shining surface of water for the diver, the surface to which he comes back after his dive to the depths of the body and its hidden organs, comes back with the secret of a *personality*. (Just look how much his portraits of men say about their inner life!)

So, you have come to think that all flesh is feminine! The idea is, God knows, merely the result of a vast and ancient plot! Of course flesh is not only feminine! Maybe if women throughout the centuries have remained desirable – and you haven't grown tired of it! – this is partly due to this persistent lie as old as the world, which proposes that flesh is a feminine attribute. But it's a pure convention whereby men use the bodies of women to speak of their own passive desires, their desire to behave with abandon, to lie suppliant on a bed. Men have delegated to women this aspect of lust. The woman's body has become, not only the object but also the *ambassador* of masculine desire. Consider, rather, simply of desire, regardless of gender. (The skin of men, where it is soft – have you noticed? It is softer than the skin of women ...)

Everywhere, female figures arch and wiggle themselves to embody something that transcends the sexes. Danaë, the nymphs, Venus, and even Mary, who poses piously as she receives Gabriel's message, but who expresses exactly the same thing in each and every *Annunciation*: the desire that calls out, that begs, that offers its own vulnerability, its neck, its veins, its health (as in *Dracula*), its 'virtue' as the prudens would call it. Marsyas is a violent and extreme expression of the same passion. Of a wild fantasy for fusion. Apollo couldn't bear his desire for the satyr any longer! Both were male, both musicians. They had to meet under the skin, if not under the sheets. There you are: that is my version of the story! In other words, what Marsyas' torturers are waiting to look at is what you call feminine flesh!

In other words, if flesh became synonymous with femininity it was, I guess, less because of its texture than because man needed its qualities to express a hidden side of his own desire. The reason men have painted so many nudes is not only to enjoy being voyeurs, but to confess the unconfessable about themselves!

I believe that women became more attractive, more sexy when they were made to reveal indirectly this unavowed desire that both male and female share. They became beautiful when this prescription of universal sexuality was tattooed upon their white and flabby flesh!

Titian was the painter of flesh which commands rather than invites. 'Take me.' 'Drink me,' it orders. He may have disguised himself for me as an old man or as a dog, but he also disguised himself as women. Titian as Mary Magdalene, as Aphrodite!

And here I think we come close to something concerning his power: he wore the disguise of everything he painted. He was trying to be everywhere. Competing with God. He wanted to create from his palette nothing less than life, and to rule over the universe. And his despair (the doubt you asked about) was that he couldn't, like Pan, *be everything*. He could only create pictorially and wear disguises. His fear was of being only a man, not a god as well, not a woman as well, not a forest as well, not a mist, not a lump of earth. Of being only a man!

Danaë's breast – so marvellous, so suggestive, and so impalpable – reveals, at one and the same time, all the limits and the triumph of his pictorial creation when compared with God's.

Kut,

Do you remember me telling you about La Polonaise? Bogena, she's called. She comes from a farm in eastern Poland. She came to Paris to work as a cleaner in people's flats – often the flats of well-off Russian émigrés. Now she lives with Robert, who is an engineer, also from eastern Poland. Here in Paris, he works as a builder. Black labour. They live together in a studio flat in a suburb. Fifth floor, no lift. The flat, which is no bigger than a caravan, has seventy, eighty paraffin lamps arranged like ikons along the walls. All of them were bought in flea markets, then repaired, cleaned, polished and given new wicks. When he comes home in the evening, Robert lights four or five of them, and they stop for a moment to watch the flames.

Two evenings ago, Bogena and Robert came to spend the evening because it was the Russian New Year. They brought red, crystal glasses as a present. And sausages and wine. Sitting at the table while they spoke Russian, I tried to draw Bogena. Not for the first time. I always fail, because her face is very mobile and I can't forget her beauty. And to draw well, you have to forget that.

It was long past midnight when they left. As I was doing my last drawing, Robert said 'This is your last chance tonight, just draw her, John, draw her like a man!' When they had gone, I took the least bad drawing and started working on it with colours – acrylic. With four tubes, water, and my fingers. Suddenly, like a weather-vane swinging round because the wind has changed, the portrait began to look like something. Her 'likeness' now was in my head – and all I had to do was to draw it out, not look for it. The paper tore. I rubbed on paint sometimes as thick as ointment. Her face began to lean itself to, to smile at, its own representation. At four in the morning, it smiled back at me.

Next day, the frail piece of paper, heavy with paint, still looked good. In the daylight, there were a few nuances of tone to change. Colours applied at night sometimes tend to be too desperate – like shoes pulled off without being untied. Now it was finished.

From time to time during the day, I'd go and look at it: Bogena's face had made a present of what it could leave behind of itself.

But if my drawing had been a great one, it would have been even closer to the energy of Bogena's face. When I say *closer*, I don't mean more naturalistic or more faithful. All great works, the works that can hold us in their thrall indefinitely, are similarly *close* to what they are after. The old man painting of dogs, one of Rothko's late, large paintings of a coloured glow, or a Hokusai drawing of a couple fucking, are all equally *close* to their aim. *They are as close as one can get.*

In theory, something could be closer (the distance is still considerable), but then there would be, could be, no image – because at a closer distance, you can no longer separate, no longer resist the colossal gravitational pull of the 'model' – whatever that model is, a pup, transcendent light, or the act of fucking. When you are so close that you are touching all the time, there can be no art. And when you

are really far away, there's no energy in what is made, it's merely a ritual object, because there's no touching at all.

Having said all this about the intimacy from which images may be born, I come to your point about TOUCH, about which the old man knew everything. In the *Entombment*, Christ's body palpitates from within in the same way as Danaë's. But the painting evokes Pity instead of Desire. Desire and Pity. Strangely, both provoke a similar kind of touching! The old man knew this, too.

Je t'embrasse, John

ATHENS

John

What makes a body seduce you, or a written page absorb you till you drown in it, or a canvas live, move, speak, and radiate until it draws you into its own space is, in each case, their special way of being themselves, of being inseparable from themselves. Of not giving a damn about the onlooker. Of not waiting on anyone else. Of being themselves as if they were alone in the world.

Such a power to seduce has a stance which is practically that of scorn towards the spectator and towards all codes, manners, and measures. Every onlooker, in face of such a power, is, by definition, an intruder, somebody who has surprised something in a state of total intimacy with itself, in a state of both truth and transparency.

What delights a man about the sensuality of a woman – whether or not it involves the act of love – the way her gestures, her intonations, her prescience, derive from the depths of her being, from her childhood perhaps, from what she is in her own dreams, from how she may be when she is asleep alone! The man is overjoyed to have witnessed this. (What I say about men may be true about women too, but I've more often asked myself what it is that has delighted the man lying beside me than the other way around, to the point where it sometimes seems I know men better than I know myself.) He has received a gift, or, let's say, he has had the nous to have taken in something which was private and buried, virgin.

Each gesture of a woman is the sum of all her secret gestures, and a man's pleasure is being in on the secret. And the opposite? It seems to me that the woman's pleasure has more to do with her secret being discovered, with something in her which was buried and asleep being awakened. Maybe this is where 'Snow White', 'Sleeping Beauty', and other stories begin.

Far more than a man, she is like the page which invites, the canvas which appeals. This is maybe why her body has so often been represented in art. Not just because most of the artists were men, but because here there is something essential in the relation between the sexes: the woman inseparable from herself, and the man looking over her, finding pleasure in her immediacy!

Pictures by Rothko and Titian, but also by Courbet, possess this quality. They are so completely themselves that they contain all the *vertical* depth of their being. They exclude any reference to rule

obedience. Snapping their fingers at others, they simply exist with us or without us. We have an interest in discovering their secret and their inner truth, but they, they don't give a fuck, tyrannical as they are, faithful only to themselves, inevitable. They owe their existence only to themselves tautologically! A little like God. (Hence perhaps the 'fatality' of *femmes fatales*?)

Titian here is the god behind God; his painting, like nature, has its own laws, delivers – or doesn't deliver – its own unsharable secrets, so true to itself that it needs no justification, no explanation, no story! It's there in front of us, clear, enigmatic, as solid as a mass of irrefutable matter, a pure product of itself – in all its verticality!

Does this make any sense to you?

I believe the success of a painting depends far less on any closeness to its model, to what it aims at and represents, than on its closeness to a self, to the self's memory and gaze and truth. A painter's painting is like a canvas which radiates, a page which invites, a woman who glows: he's faithful to himself: he filters nothing, he must stick to his own perception and imagination and his own five senses. If he dams up nothing, his secret will open on the surface of the canvas, and it's this, in all its nakedness, which will entice. If an artist is true to what lies deepest in him, like the coal at the bottom of a mine, his work invites.

I'm not preaching some magic, occult theory whereby artists should ignore technique and everyone become really a potential Picasso. Far from it. Simply, we are all capable of sensuality, aren't we, and a kind of inner transparency might make each of us more desirable.

Here, and certainly in art, a certain *savoir-faire* is indispensable. The thing is to play with the techniques one has acquired to re-become naive, to unlearn as well as learn. A cat is spell-binding by the virtue of her natural grace alone. A ham actor turns you off with his tricks.

Art attracts and sweeps away with its mastery, but it's mastery put to the service of something naked, secret, true, virgin, never-before-seen – something which almost comes from a violation. And art does this involuntarily; it can't do otherwise. It makes a hole in the paper – like you with your drawing of Bogena.

There are people who know how to live like that, too. They learn, they quote, they consult, and all the while they stay in touch with their own essence. There remains something untreated and unconscious about them. When they listen, they are like wells; when they speak, they do so like fountains. When they move, it's like hearing a voice, and when they concentrate (shaving or tightening a screw or copying a poem), they give off the same mystery as a priest does performing a liturgy. The old man I met was like this. And you are, too. (Here I give away the clue to our correspondence.)

To be intimate is to re-find in oneself that which is most hidden and private; intimacy can also imply a marvellous, narrow relationship between two people. To be intimate is a way of listening to one's internal sense, of listening to one's own dialogue between the said and the unsaid. The second jubilation of intimacy, the one which is (occasionally) shared, implies two listenings, two dialogues which overlap and couple.

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